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Departure of a Good Soldier

The chilling of Soviet-U.S. relations blighted Vance's dreams



In his handwritten letter of resignation to President Carter, Cyrus Vance declared: "I look with pride and satisfaction at the many actions and new directions which have marked our foreign policy under your leadership." Then he listed the accomplishments for which he wants to be remembered. Yet even that recitation—by which Vance meant to console both Carter and himself—has a melancholy ring. It is a list of what may well turn out to be pyrrhic victories, noble failures and unfinished business:

The Panama Canal treaties. The Administration's knock-down, drag-out, barely successful battle for Senate ratification left political scars that have still not healed.

The Camp David accord and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. That process, in which Vance played a key role, shows signs of slowing to a halt and perhaps collapsing altogether.

Normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski handled the announcement in a way that worsened Soviet-American relations and humiliated Vance by making him look as though he had been cut out of the play.

The strengthening of our military forces and our alliances. The Administration's military buildup has threatened a new arms race with the U.S.S.R. without assuaging congressional hawks, and NATO is racked by new strains, including disagreements over whether to modernize U.S. missiles in Europe.

The negotiation of the SALT II agreement. This masterpiece of modern diplomacy is as much Vance's handiwork as anyone's, but it may never become law.

The new thrust and direction given to our relations with the nations of the Third World. The U.S. seems baffled and threatened by upheaval in the Third World as never before.

Vance leaves behind considerable admiration at the State Department, but it is tinged with disappointment. On the one hand, the foreign service officers are grateful to him for devoting many hours to testifying on Capitol Hill on behalf of reforms that would improve salaries and benefits, streamline an archaic and occluded promotion system, and raise the quality and morale of ambassadors. Unlike Kissinger, Vance showed great respect for the professionalism of career diplomats and increased their role in day-to-day policymaking.

But the participatory system he introduced did not entirely mesh with his own rather remote personality. He was awkward in large meetings, uncomfortable about knocking heads, and he preferred to delegate unpleasant jobs. Even

some of Vance's staunchest admirers at Foggy Bottom fault him for not going to the mat more often to protect the department against empire building by other agencies.

The far more important battle that Vance could never bring himself to wage with a vengeance was with the National Security Council and Zbig Brzezinski. In a number of conversations during the postelection transition in 1976, the two men agreed that one of their biggest problems would be to keep their staffs from each other's throats. They turned out to be right. Immediately after his Inauguration, Carter promulgated presidential Decisions 1 and 2, a plan for restructuring and strengthening the National Security Council. A group of Vance's aides bearded their boss in his office and alerted him to what they saw as Brzezinski's opening move in a power play against the State Department.

Vance told them: "I'm not going to make an issue over it. The best way to keep it from becoming a problem is not to get all excited about it." One of his aides persisted. Vance frowned and his eyes narrowed. "I don't want to hear any more of this," he said sternly. "We're not going to have that kind of squabbling."

Yet the squabbling continued for the next three years, both behind closed doors and, increasingly, in public. When a sensitive piece of information about Soviet-American relations leaked to the press, a number of top NSC officials immediately—and falsely—accused Vance's Soviet affairs adviser, Marshall Shulman, of being the source. When an article appeared revealing a U.S. espionage operation, a middle-level State Department officer spread the rumor—false—that Brzezinski's deputy, David Aaron, had planted the story.

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